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硕 士 学 位 论 文

**Inheritance and Transcendence: A  
Poststructuralist Comparison between  
*Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Song of  
Solomon***

继承和超越:《他们眼望上苍》和《所罗门之歌》的解构比较

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## Abstract

Focusing on their feminist discourses and the expansion of power relationships, both *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Song of Solomon* represent African American literature in various aspects, such as gender, class, and racial issues, which all deserve readers' attention. Within powerful linguistic structures, both novels ingeniously develop the protagonists' journey of searching for self identity and end with their physical and spiritual reconstruction. Both Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison are concerned about the richness of African American folklore and culture and explore the protagonists' spiritual journey of questing for self, rebirth or transformation, the universal pain and suffering and spiritual wholeness related to ancestral wisdom. As female writers, both Hurston and Morrison shoulder their historical responsibility to demonstrate their unique cultural visibility and history. Embedded in the two authors' texts is a history of achievement and a cultural heritage, which raises a lot of questions for readers to answer.

Both *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Song of Solomon* can be regarded as coming-of-age novels in the African American literature tradition. So, this M.A. thesis, from poststructuralist point of view, discussing similarities and differences of the two protagonists' journeys, intends to construct their journeys to search for self identity in the process of coming of age and reconstruct time and history presented in the connections between past, present and future, in accordance with what Toni Morrison states in the essay "Ancestor as Foundation." Their self-identity and self-definition is constructed in their learning and growing process. By constructing a self, the protagonists are able to construct an outside world and the black's spirit.

Sharply defined within the national-historical boundaries of African American experience, both novels use history, autobiography and folklore and a lot of central images to create the black female writer's space. Both novels are characterized by their richness of voices and storytelling. Both novels subtly explore the oppositions between dream and truth, past and future, the dichotomy between external community

and internal self. Fully demonstrating the wealth of African American cultural resources and tradition, both novels show not only survival but also hope for the African Americans, which is my thesis intends to explore.

Readers can evaluate the inheritance and transcendence between the two novels, and further perceive how feminist discourse constructs African American literature tradition. The African American tradition in their novels and what should black literature be in different periods and the inheritance and transcendence embedded in the novels deserve our attention. Toni Morrison goes a step further, which directs our attention to the question: “How does one act in the face of history?”

My thesis is made up of four parts. The first chapter traces the development of coming-of-age novels in African American literature tradition and explores the representation of coming of age in the two novels and further discusses the sisterhood between Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. The second chapter examines the protagonists’ construction of self-identity, showing their journey towards spiritual achievement. The third chapter focuses on the analysis of central images in the novels to help construct their journeys. The fourth chapter probes into the reconstruction of ancestors as the foundation of the survival of the black’s spirit.

Through the protagonists’ journeys, both authors provide much space for readers to construct and deconstruct their physical, psychological and spiritual achievements which are embedded in the rich folklore and pattern in African American literature tradition. Finding the similarities and differences between Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison enables us better to understand the world both female writers create in their novels. Both writers’ attention is focused on psychological and spiritual reconstruction to chart a new territory structurally and thematically.

**Key Words:** deconstruction; reconstruction; inheritance; transcendence

## 摘要

聚焦于女性主义话语和权利关系的扩大,《他们眼望上苍》和《所罗门之歌》在性别,等级,种族等各方面的探讨都代表了美国黑人文学,这些方面都值得读者关注。在强有力的语言结构内,两部小说都真实地展示了主人公寻找自我身份的旅程,最终获得身体和心灵的重建。佐拉·尼尔·赫斯顿和托尼·莫里森都关注美国黑人民俗和文化的丰富性,探索了主人公们寻找自我身份的精神之旅,在这个过程中,普遍的苦难和痛苦,都和祖先的智慧紧密相连。作为女性作家,赫斯顿和莫里森都肩负历史重任去彰显她们独特的历史和文化。在她们的文本中嵌入的是长期的历史成就和文化遗产,这就为读者提出了许多需要解答的问题。

《他们眼望上苍》和《所罗门之歌》都是美国黑人文学传统中的成长小说,所以我的论文从后结构主义的视角,探讨这两部小说男女主人公成长历程的相同点和不同点,旨在揭示他们如何寻找自我身份,并进一步重新构建起体现在过去,现在,未来的时间和历史表征,这一点和莫里森在“祖先作为基石”一文中的陈述是一致的。在主人公的成长和学习过程中,他们建构了自我身份,学会了自我定义。通过建构自我,主人公们才得以和外界建构关系,使得黑人精神持续,代代相传。

明确界定于美国黑人经历的国家历史范围之内,这两部小说都运用历史,自传,民俗故事和一系列中心意象去开拓黑人女作家作品的空间。两部小说都明显呈现丰富的声音和故事。两部小说都巧妙地探索了梦想和真理,过去和未来之间,自我和他人之间的二元对立。在充分展示美国黑人文学渊源和传统的丰富的基础上,所以这两部小说传达的不仅是美国黑人精神的幸存,而且对于美国黑人来说,是一种希望,这一点正是本文想探讨的。

读者评估这两部小说之间的继承和超越的关系,也会进一步领会女性话语怎样建构美国黑人文学传统。黑人文学在不同时期的表现和这两个文本中暗藏的继承和超越的关系值得我们探讨。莫里森走得更远一步,她将我们的注意力转向个人如何去面对历史。

论文由四个章节组成。第一章追寻美国黑人成长小说的历程,探讨了成长经



历在这两部小说中的体现以及赫斯顿，沃克和莫里森之间的姐妹情谊。第二章主要探讨主人公自我身份的建构，获得精神成长的旅程。第三章着眼于分析文本中的中心意象，以便更好地建构成长旅程。第四章探讨了祖先作为基石的重构，使得黑人精神幸存。

通过两个主人公的成长历程，两位作者都给读者提供了足够的空间去建构文学人物的身体，心理和精神收获，而这些恰恰隐藏于美国黑人文学传统的丰富的民俗故事和类型中。在赫斯顿和莫里森之间找出共同点和不同点，会使得我们更好地理解这两个女作家在他们作品中所呈现的世界。两位女作家的注意力都集中于心理和精神的重建，试图在结构和主题上画出新领域。

**关键词：**解构 重构 继承 超越

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## Introduction

Expanding on the issues of power and voice, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* successfully explores Janie's journey into womanhood, in which she shifts from restriction to spiritual liberation and fulfillment. Through her three marriages, she finally makes her voice heard and searches for further horizon. Her pursuit for a life of her own represents black women's pursuit of dream and truth. Weaving the tensions between Janie and the larger group she lives in and the inner tensions she experiences, employing extensive use of nature images, such as pear trees, far horizon, apron, Zora Neale Hurston has successfully created a vivid picture of Janie's individuality and her growth from girlhood to womanhood in connection with the process of psychological and spiritual reconstruction.

Like Hurston, in *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison also presents readers with Milkman's quest for his identity and ancestral history. Milkman's journey forward to flight is a journey into his past. Within the frame of the folktale of flying Africans and the history of family connections, Toni Morrison's exploration of Milkman's journey from North to South, his returning to his ancestral world and finally finding his identity and liberation and life's value, to some extent, potentially destabilize the construction of identity and question traditional western conceptions of individualism. In the novel, Pilate, a black female figure, enables Milkman to undertake an initiation journey into his family history, into the history of black people and into a mature knowledge of how the people and places of his past and present connect. The world Toni Morrison creates in *Song of Solomon* not only depicts and explores Milkman, as a growing individual, who journeys from immaturity to maturity by returning to the past, but also has some connections with the world in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in which Janie's journey shares some similarities and differences with that of Milkman. In a larger sense, the worlds both Hurston and Morrison create in the novels share rich African American culture, tradition and experiences. Specifically speaking, the two female writers in their texts provide more information and create more space

for readers to construct a new feminist discourse.

Both *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Song of Solomon* can be regarded as coming-of-age novels in African American literature tradition. So, my thesis, from a poststructuralist point of view, discussing the similarities and differences of two protagonists' journeys, intends to construct their journeys to search for self identity in the process of coming of age and reconstruct time and history presented in the connection between past, present and future, which is in accordance with what Toni Morrison states in her essay "Ancestors as Foundation."

Readers can evaluate the inheritance and transcendence between the two novels, and further perceive how feminist discourse constructs African American literature tradition. Their quests for self-identity and self-definition are constructed in their learning and growing processes. By constructing a self, the protagonists are able to construct an outside world for the survival of the black's spirit.

Sharply defined within the national-historical boundaries of African American experience, both novels use history, autobiography and folklore to claim space. Both novels are characterized by the richness of voices and storytelling. Both novels subtly explore the oppositions between dream and truth, past and future as well as the dichotomy between external community and internal self. Fully demonstrating the wealth of African American cultural resources and tradition, both novels show not only the survival of the black's spirit but also the hope for the African Americans, which my thesis intends to explore.

Through the protagonists' journeys, both authors provide much space for readers to construct and deconstruct their physical, psychological and spiritual achievements, which are embedded in the rich folklores in African American literature tradition. Finding the similarities and differences between Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison enables us to better understand the worlds both female writers create in their novels and further perceive the inheritance and transcendence between the two novels.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston explores the heroine Janie's journey from restriction to spiritual liberation and fulfillment into womanhood. The narration of her self-discovery and raising her voice and searching for further

horizon interprets the conflicts between the individual's desire and the community's need to stifle it. Janie emerges as a figure of unmatched strength in the novel. Through her three marriages, her psychological and spiritual reconstruction seems complete on her journey for selfhood.

Like Hurston, Toni Morrison explores Milkman's journey for his identity and ancestral history in *Song of Solomon*. In a conversation with Gloria Naylor, Morrison points out, people "who are trying to show certain kinds of connections between myself and Zora Neale Hurston are always dismayed and disappointed in me because I hadn't read Zora Neale Hurston except for the little short story before I began to write... [The] fact I had never read Zora Neale Hurston and wrote *The Bluest Eyes* and *Sula* anyway means that the tradition really exist" (qtd. in Smith, 2007: 7). However, we are surprised to find both novels share some similarities at least in some aspects. So, Morrison, as novelist, editor, playwright and essayist, enjoys such high regard and general esteem both in America and internationally that she invites frequent comparisons with the best known writers of American and European literary canons: William Faulkner, James Joyce, Thomas Hardy and others. Here I intend to make a comparison between Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison. They are black women writers in different periods; however, their novels deserve a comparison. According to the material available, we find that some critics have already paid attention to the contrast between the two novels.

According to Matza, "it is useful to conclude with a final statement about why the comparison deserves attention. First, for people to know who they are and what is possible for them—two concerns of Morrison and Hurston—they must understand the past and its connection to the present. They must know their culture's contributions; they must be aware of what has helped them survive. Connected to this is Alice Walker's assertion, 'we are a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away. If they do, it is our duty as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of children. If necessary, bone by bone'" (1985: 53). So, inspired by Matza's essay "Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Toni Morrison's *Sula*: A Comparison," I decide to make a tentative study on the similarities and differences



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